

How to Put a Baby to Sleep



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Does your little one often wake up crying? Take back the night with this 24/7 guide on how to get your baby to sleep longer.

If your baby tosses and turns all night, reworking [their sleep routine](#) might solve the issue. "There's no such thing as a bad sleeper, just bad sleep habits, and they're usually reversible," says Ingrid Prueher, a pediatric sleep consultant in Fairfield, Connecticut, and host of the [Baby Sleep 911 video series](#). Avoid these common sleep saboteurs, and you may actually snooze through the night.

1. Start a Routine

"One of the ways a baby learns it's time to go to sleep is from cues in the environment," notes Deborah Givan, M.D., director of the Sleep Disorders Center at Riley Hospital for Children, in Indianapolis. About 30 minutes before bedtime, turn the noise down and dim the lights. "The right lighting is essential because it helps set a baby's internal clock," she explains. "Our brain associates light and dark with being awake or asleep. Turning the lights low at night—and exposing your baby to bright light in the a.m.—will help this process along."

Once you minimize the stimuli, you can introduce other calming rituals, like a warm bath, lullabies, or softly spoken stories. Dr. Givan recommends having the [nighttime ritual](#) in place as soon as possible, and ideally by about 6 to 8 weeks. Be consistent—do the activities in the same order every night—so your baby learns what to expect.

2. Don't Rely on Soothing Methods

"If you put your baby in the crib when they're already asleep and they wake up in the night, which all humans do, they won't recognize their surroundings and will need

your help getting back to sleep," notes Dr. Givan. "Try to put your baby down drowsy but awake." This will help them learn to self-soothe and fall asleep—and, more importantly, fall back to sleep—on their own, which is the main goal of [sleep training](#).

Adrienne Porzio of Centerport, New York, can attest to this. She began driving her newborn around at night to get her to fall asleep—and she was still relying on that crutch when her daughter was 5 months old. "The issue we get the most calls about is parents automatically repeating soothing habits to the point that the baby is hooked," says Los Angeles sleep consultant Heather Turgeon, coauthor of [*The Happy Sleeper*](#). Newborns benefit from rocking, bouncing, and soothing to sleep, but babies develop quickly and don't need those things forever.

"By about 5 months, most babies have the capability to fall asleep on their own, and if we're still doing it for them, we're getting in their way," says Turgeon. "Start practicing in the early months to put Baby down awake, at least once a day—usually the first nap is the most successful." Keep your cuddle time, but gradually stop the patting and shushing and rocking to sleep.

3. Don't Feed Baby to Sleep

"Newborns fall asleep all the time while eating, and I don't want anyone to stress about that," notes Turgeon. But if your baby often dozes off during a feeding, they'll think they need to eat in order to get back to sleep.

To combat this issue, gradually move the feeding earlier until your little one can get through it, then finish the routine with a calming book and song, and tuck them in drowsy but awake. You may still need to get up for a nighttime feeding, but then it will be about hunger, not soothing.

4. Stick to an Early Bedtime

When considering how to put a baby to sleep, timing is just as important as a routine. "At around 8 weeks, babies have a rise in melatonin, a drowsy-making hormone the body releases when it's time for sleep, which means they're ready for an early bedtime consistent with the sun setting," says Turgeon. "If you keep them up late instead, they become overstimulated and harder to put down." Melatonin levels rise somewhere around sundown, but given that sundown can be anytime from 4:30 in winter to 8:30 in summer, stick to the clock and put your baby down around 6:30 or 7 p.m. for the most success. If the sun is still up, close the shades.

"A good sign of drowsiness is when the baby becomes calm—they're less active, have a bored look, or just stare off," says Turgeon. Don't mistake this behavior as happiness for being awake. Seize the moment and start your bedtime routine. "The baby's internal clock is telling them when to be awake and when to be asleep, and you want to reinforce that," she notes.

5. Eliminate Snacking

"Sleep and nutrition go hand-in-hand," notes Prueher. For the first 8 weeks, a baby should be feeding on demand every 2 to 2.5 hours. "If they want to eat every hour or so, they may not be [consuming enough at each session](#)," says Prueher. Keep a 24-hour log of how many ounces a bottle-fed baby takes and at what time. For a breastfed baby, write down how many minutes they're nursing each session. "If they eat for 20 minutes during the nighttime feeding but only five or ten minutes during the day, they're just snacking," says Prueher. "And they're not filling their belly enough to sleep through the night."

On the flip side, if Baby is eating well during the day, they should be able to sleep for a 4- to 6-hour stretch at night by around 2.5 to 3 months. To help your baby eat more

efficiently, work toward spacing out their meals (distract them with a pacifier or some entertainment) so they're actually hungry each time. Also, don't neglect burping. "Sometimes we mistake coming off the breast or bottle as being finished, when really the baby needs to be burped," notes Prueher. Bright lights or noise can also be distracting. Try feeding Baby in a darker, quiet room, especially when they become more interested in their surroundings

6. Take Naps Seriously

A well-rested child will sleep better than an overtired one. It seems counterintuitive, but skipping a nap (or keeping a baby up late) in hopes that they'll sleep longer at night simply doesn't work. "When infants get overtired, their stress hormones rise," says Turgeon. "Then, once they finally fall asleep, there's a good chance it won't be for long, because those stress hormones wake them when they're in a lighter sleep stage."

This is why [regular naps are so essential](#) for getting a baby to sleep. "At the age of 2 months, a baby's optimal span of awake time is only about 90 minutes between sleeps, which goes by really quickly," says Turgeon. "They don't have the tolerance to be awake more than that until 4 to 5 months." Keep an eye on the clock, because picking up on your baby's tired gaze isn't easy.

7. Set Napping Guidelines

It may be tempting to let your sweetie snooze in their car seat or on your chest, but you should try for at least one nap a day in the crib. That way, they'll get the quality rest they need. "The first nap is mentally restorative for an infant and will dictate how the entire day goes, so ideally you want them to have that one in their crib at home,"

notes Prueher. "The second is physically restorative, so once your baby's old enough to be moving around a lot, they really need it to be quality too."

By 3 to 4 months of age, your little one will have longer awake periods, and you can work toward a nap schedule: one in the morning, one in the early afternoon, and a short late-afternoon nap if needed. Naps are a great time for you to practice putting Baby down drowsy, adds Prueher. It's not the middle of the night, so you can think more clearly, pick up on cues, and follow through.

8. Let Baby Work It Out

If you rush in immediately at night to help your munchkin fall back to sleep, you're creating a cycle that will be hard to break. "As long as you know that they can't be hungry, you can pause before rushing in," says Turgeon, who recommends starting a "soothing ladder" from as early as day one. When you [hear your baby fuss](#), pause for a minute and see if they can work it out themselves. "If they can't, go in and do the least intrusive thing—pat or shush but don't pick them up," says Turgeon. If that doesn't work, you gradually climb the soothing ladder until you get them back to sleep.

"The point of the soothing ladder isn't to make a baby learn to self-soothe overnight, but to give them enough space to allow their self-soothing skills to unfold naturally, over time," says Turgeon. Plus, it will help you avoid a traumatic cry-it-out situation down the road, when you're still learning how to get a baby to sleep.

9. Stop Overthinking the Situation

Resist the urge to research "how to put a baby to sleep" every single night.

"Information overload causes parents to try a million different things, which doesn't build any consistency or trust," says Prueher. "Children thrive on knowing what to expect." She recommends giving your baby a little space to show their capabilities.

